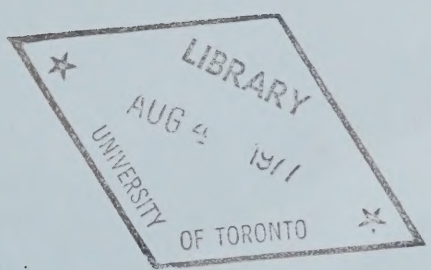


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# Papers on the Italian Community



Ontario

Ministry of Culture and Recreation  
Multicultural Development Branch

Hon. Robert Welch  
Minister  
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Deputy Minister





One of the papers presented at a multicultural workshop for Ontario Housing Corporation community relations officers at Queen's Park.

## THE QUIET DESPERATION OF THE IMMIGRANT

By Burt D'Antini

"..... and then madness was very near, as I believed it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments"

T. E. Lawrence

With these words, Lawrence (of Arabia) sums up his life, that of an educated, urbane Englishman, among the tribes of Arabian Bedouins. He had abandoned one mode of living but could not span the cultural gulf which separated him from the people he lived and worked among. What resulted was "an intense loneliness in life"--a feeling with which the immigrant must live in varying degrees of intensity so long as he is separated from the land which gave him birth and nourished him.

To understand the stresses experienced by the Italian immigrant in Canadian society, one must remember that he is both an immigrant and an emigrant; and that, unlike most other Europeans who have come to Toronto, the Italian's shift has been not only a geographical-cultural one but a temporal one as well. He has abandoned his farm in Southern Italy (whence the majority of Italians in Toronto originated) where he scratched out a living for himself and his family from an impoverished land with agricultural methods which, as recently as the Second World War, had not changed appreciably since the Middle Ages, and has immigrated to a typically twentieth-century, highly industrialized and technological urban centre. The disorientation resulting from the displacement is overwhelming. Hoping for a professional future for his children and greater material welfare for himself and his wife, he has exiled himself from the land of his birth. In classical times, exile was often dreaded more than death itself. And, in a sense, the present-day Italian immigrant has committed social suicide in that he has abandoned the cultural and social milieu which defined him, and upon which he looked for a sense of identity, and has not found an adequate substitute in Canadian society.



So he relies greatly on his immediate family and kinsmen to lessen the disorientation, insecurity and anxiety of functioning in an alien culture which hosts him, but which he does not understand. To lessen these negative feelings he increasingly embodies values which are basically materialistic and centre around two things: the job and the house. And the importance of the job is defined mainly by the importance of the house to the Italian family--which is paramount.

The central institution of Italian society is the nuclear family, and as an institution, it provides a system of social control which operates to enforce values which are unique to it. It perpetuates mores and values which are old, traditional and strict. (It is not infrequent for the father, as the undisputed head of the family and delegator of authority to resort to physical measures to enforce the family's control of the individual, regardless of whether the individual is male or female, married or single.) However, it is a system which is secure because the patterns of behaviour it enforces are stable, accepted by the majority as time-tested, and sanctioned by the Church. This is vastly different from the North American system where control is loose, and rests mainly with the individual.

Historically, the Italian family has been the bulwark of the individual against disorder. It has flourished because of (or, at the expense of) the weakness of Italian political institutions. Where, as in Southern Italy, institutionalized authority has been weak ("all men in power are corrupt"-- because they naturally seek to advance their personal and family welfare), the safety and well-being of the individual are guaranteed mainly by the family.

For the Italian, and Southern Italian in particular, kinship occupies a more important place in a person's social life than for the North American. The rights and obligations which derive from membership in it provide the individual with his basic moral code. Moreover, a man's social status as a person with honour is closely linked with his ability to maintain and/or improve the economic position of his family, and to safeguard the purity of its women, whose virtue is bound inextricably to the family's collective honour. Thus, a man's responsibility for his family is the value upon which his life is centred. Other values and organizational principles are of secondary importance. If they interfere with his ability to carry out his primary obligations to his family, he combats them. In so doing, he is supported by his peers, even though such actions may sometimes be contrary to the law. The behavioural and moral code governing the family is not necessarily the same as the legal one which governs the social order. Most of the time the two codes are not in conflict with each other; but when they are, the latter assumes a secondary importance.

For the Southern Italian, the world is divided into kin and non-kin. The kinship network is vast, but the help which can be expected from kinsmen, and reciprocally, the obligations one owes them are directly related to the genealogical distance between the two. The degree of loyalty extracted by the family from



its members is boundless. Every one is duty-bound to provide for its welfare; to enrich it, make it powerful and respected, defend its honour and ensure its eternal duration. Hence the value put upon having lots of children, especially sons to carry on the name.

And hence the value of the house as a focal point of the nuclear family's (present and future) obligations and affection. And the preoccupation with one's job (means to an end) and house (the end). This end must be achieved as quickly as possible and must be owned outright. And to achieve this, all members of the immigrant family are under pressure from both within and without to work and contribute to the overall income, often at considerable sacrifice to themselves.

This is greatly at odds with North American values which, in so far as the home is concerned, are reflected by the boom in high-rise living and the accelerating rate at which people move from one dwelling place to another.

This discrepancy of values is carried into the Italian home by the adolescent who has assimilated an attitude towards money and home different from that of his parents, who resents having to turn over all his personal income (usually from an after-school job) to acquire property which has not the same meaning for him as his parents. He often cannot understand or appreciate the inordinate sacrifices of his parents, and the degree of sacrifice expected of him, and he rebels against his parents' neutralization of his efforts to achieve a measure of self-support which North-American society values so highly, and which he too has learned to appreciate. He resents the control his parents have over him. And they, in turn, seeing the degree of internalization of alien values, become terrified of "losing" their children. Desperate to re-assert control, the parents threaten them with sending them back to Italy where they will learn the values which the parents see themselves as having failed to instill in their children. But this, if ever, is rarely done.

In Southern Italy ownership of "terreni" (lands) is a manifest sign of a man's masculinity and honour (a man with honour because he is providing for his family), and of the status of the family as a whole. It is both an indication of what he has inherited from his predecessors (which reflects on the family's prestige and power), and what he has personally contributed to the enrichment of the historical family.

The woman's function on the other hand is much more diversified than that of her husband. Her roles include those of mother, faithful sexual partner, educator, peace-keeper, and co-labourer. Within the family her influence and control are boundless; yet outwardly she is a second-class member of society, subordinate to her husband who is and must be regarded as the supreme boss of the household. However, it is by and large an illusion which the family tries to convey to the outsider; for her power, if not formally acknowledged, is nevertheless very real.



Power, moreover, is the context within which is defined the marriage contract. The principal purpose of married life is not the realization of adolescent love dreams and through a romantic ecstasy, the perfect fusion of two souls. It is the foundation of a new family and the reinforcement of existing ones. This is an attitude characteristic of the Southern Italian village community. Any motivations over and above this are neither understood nor appreciated. They are the sentiments of the "borghesi", the sophisticated and urbane middle class. They are alien to the villager's scheme of values, which, in Italy, are shared by all members of the household.

However, for the immigrant family, the situation is quite different. Where there are adolescents who have internalized many North American values and norms of behaviour, a state of affairs exists which goes under the currently fashionable phenomenon of "the generation gap". This gap, however, is very much widened by the fact that the two generations were brought up in different communities with different cultures and a different set of values. In many instances the situation is aggravated by a severe handicap in simple instrumental communication. The parents speak little English, and the children speak little if any Italian. Nor are they able to teach each other in any meaningful way as both parents may work (usually with fellow immigrants) and the children are at school where, under pressure to acculturate as quickly as possible, they function entirely in English. With severe communication deficiencies, parental control is corroded even further. The gulf grows, and leads to resentment and hostility, especially when the children have to follow the dictates of the father merely on the basis of his authority, without any appreciation of his reasons.

The parents operate mostly out of fear. The possessiveness and overprotection of children, natural to the Italian parent, is heightened to the point of suffocation. What there is here in Canada is generally seen as bad. The parents see part of their duty as preserving as much of Italy in their children as they can, which means a very stringent application and enforcement of the values and norms of behaviour which they accept, but which are not necessarily acceptable to their children. For the boy, it means great pressure to do well in school in order to become a professional man whose status and prestige will enhance the family as a whole, irrespective of whether the boy wants to do it, or is able to do it. If his aspirations and those of his parents coincide, there is no problem. In fact, they will give him a great source of moral (and material) support. If the aspirations are different, conflict may result. In order to avoid this conflict, the student who is more educated and is more knowledgeable of the school system than his parents may paint a picture of his progress at school which is not necessarily in keeping with the reality. Of course, in the vast majority of cases only a modicum of communication between the home and the school exists and the parents are obliged to accept what the son says as wholly true. If they are at all inclined to obtain confirmation from the school, it very often happens that because of the dire shortage of Italian-speaking staff in the schools, the son himself is asked to act as translator. Obviously, this permits biases in interpretation.



Therefore, where his education is concerned, the student may effectively eliminate his father's authority completely, if he chooses. It is the father who is subject to the son under such circumstances, and this is a blow to the father's pride and sense of honour.

With adolescent girls the situation is different and more painful. Parental control is very rigorous and constant. Generally they are not allowed to go on dates like their Anglo-Saxon peers, nor to participate in extra-curricular activities. The reason for this is two-fold: first, she is required to assist the mother in the household work; second, and more important, there is the constant fear for, and care taken to preserve, the reputation of the girl. However much reassurance the parents might be given that there is very little to worry about when their daughter attends a social function such as a school dance, unescorted, they are plagued with the worry that the neighbours might see her alone with a boy and she will thereby acquire a bad reputation. Premarital virginity is the sine qua non of marriage, and a bad reputation is as damaging as the premature loss of virginity. This would seriously hamper the father's efforts to find a husband for his daughter and if his efforts should prove futile a certain sense of shame would descend over the entire family.

In one of my cases, the girl had rebelled to the point where she left home and lived common-law with her boyfriend. The shame felt by the parents was so acute that, no longer able to face their friends and relatives, they sold the house they had sacrificed so long to own and moved back to Italy.

Having internalized so many non-Italian norms and values, the adolescent girl feels pressured by her peers to date, wear make-up and stylish clothes, and have a boyfriend. She is subject to two sets of expectations and must, consequently, function as two beings, depending on the circumstances. It is not uncommon to hear of instances where girls leave home in the morning dressed in a manner acceptable to the mother but, once at school, change into dresses or slacks borrowed from friends. Also they invent excuses such as having to go to the library after school, in order to have time to meet with their friends. However, ruses of this kind don't often work for very long. The kinship network is vast, and all behaviour deviating from the norm is eventually reported back to the parents. The consequences are usually severe.

Thus both boys and girls must conform to, and function within, two different sets of values. Conforming to that of the parents, which is seen as old-country and irrelevant, is an act both of respect and love, as well as fear. Their natural sympathy lies with the Canadian culture, the culture of their peers. Consequently, what results from the oftentime personally repressive demand to adhere more rigorously to the precepts of the parents is a tendency to associate this repression with Italianness and to reject their Italian self. This rejection is fed by their personal sense of shame for being Italian and, therefore, different.

This abandonment of the Italian self causes within them a reluctance to speak the language. This breaks down communication even further to the point where, in extreme cases, parents and children live as strangers in the same house.

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